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Abernathy Backs Bevel Bid To Aid Ray

Crime: Murder: Texas case

ATLANTA (UPI) — The Rev. Ralph D. Abernathy said yesterday he "supports" one of his aides, the Rev. James Bevel, in his offer to defend James Earl Ray in the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

However, an SCLC spokesman, neither Abernathy nor Bevel claim to have specific evidence or knowledge that would clear Ray of murder charges in the case.

THE AIDE, Thomas Offenberger, also said Bevel feels he has been misquoted about evidence to clear Ray since he made his offer to defend him in a telegram last Saturday.

"Bevel told us this morning that his statement made no mention of evidence, or anything about who pulled the trigger," Offenberger said. "Bevel feels he has been misquoted."

Offenberger said Abernathy "supports this attempt" by Bevel to clear Ray.

"I HAVE ABSOLUTE confidence in his judgment and integrity," Abernathy said of Bevel, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) leader who offered to defend Ray last Saturday.

"If a conspiracy exists, and I believe it does, it must be fully exposed," Abernathy said. "I call upon America's oppressed and victimized to come to the aid and defense of the accused man."

Abernathy made the statement in a telegram released by the SCLC offices here. The president of the civil rights group was resting on vacation in the Virgin Islands.

Bevel, longtime staffer under King and Abernathy, is director of nonviolent education and direct action for SCLC, and works in the SCLC's Philadelphia office. In a telegram to Ray last Saturday, Bevel offered to defend him and said, "I know you are not guilty."

RAY'S ATTORNEY, Percy Foreman of Houston, has not commented on Bevel's offer of help. Neither Foreman, who is in Memphis, nor Bevel, were available for comment yesterday.

Bevel's offer of aid and his conviction that Ray is innocent of the April 4, 1968 sniper-slaying in Memphis, had caught Abernathy and the SCLC staff by complete surprise, a source said.

Bevel had not mentioned the case, nor said he was investigating the murder or had proof of a conspiracy, to any SCLC leaders, including Abernathy, the source said.

BEVEL HAS refused to elaborate on whatever information he has. Abernathy's telegram statement was issued after he, Bevel and other SCLC officials discussed the situation by telephone Wednesday.

Abernathy's statement said Bevel's offer of help "is trying to move nonviolence into a new dimension of American life. Rev. Bevel is speaking to the real issue—namely, that it is not who killed Dr. King, but what killed him.

"One man should not be made the scapegoat for this monstrous crime. The American public must have all information about the guilt for this murder," the statement said.

THE STATEMENT mentioned a "broader guilt" of racial prejudice in the nation for King's slaying. Offenberger said Abernathy has said this in the past, and now supports Bevel in his attempt to clear Ray specifically.

"Rev. Bevel, in the best tradition of nonviolence, is looking past the question of killing to the question of life in his offer to defend Mr. Ray's life," Abernathy's statement said.

"If all who share the guilt for Dr. King's assassination were put to death, it would be an atrocity greater than that committed by Adolf Hitler," it said.

The spokesman said Abernathy would have no further comment on the Bevel offer.

BEVEL HAD been subpoenaed as a defense witness in the Ray trial by Ray's former attorney, Arthur J. [illegible] Sr., the ex-mayor of Birmingham.

Hanes, in an interview, said Ray fired him and hired Foreman last November, said he had planned to prove the Black Power group with communist ties killed King, a goal of creating civil disturbance in the wake of the assassination.

A similar theory to the assassination has been given by author William Bradford Huie, who was given information on the case by Ray until the switch to attorneys.